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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate students in sociology (N=59) and psychology (N=50) participated in a study at a large midwestern university to determine if the pattern of attributional assignment, expectancy, performance, and perceived success was different in these two groups of undergraduates. Prior to taking the first of three exams each student was asked how they expected to perform on the test. Before taking exams 2 and 3, they were questioned as to whether, based on the results of the first test, they did anything different in preparing for these exams. The results showed several differences between the two groups in relation to their preparation: of the eight changes in preparation strategies students had to choose from, the two groups differed in the use of five of them. Additionally, task, luck, and effort were the preferred attributions for the psychology students, while knowledge and ability where preferred by sociology students. The study demonstrated that the use of psychology students as representatives of all undergraduates is not justifiable. Nine references. (GLR)

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Are Sociology and Psychology Students Different in the Relationship of Attribution, Expectancy, Performance, and Perceived Success to Study Strategies?

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Objective

The purpose of this study was to determine if the pattern of attributional assignment, expectancy, performance, and perceived success was different in two different groups of undergraduates.

Theoretical Framework

Although previous researchers (e.g., Covington, & Omelich, 1981; Davis & Stephan, 1980) examined the role of expectancies and attributions on subsequent actual test performance of undergraduates, neither looked at attributions other than the basic four, nor investigated if the most recent past performance and attributions were related to a change in exam preparation. This latter concern becomes most important in view of Covington and Omelich's (1981) failure to find support for the contention that variations in expectancy and retest performance depend on attributions made for a previous failure. This is in contrast to Bernstein, et al.'s (1979) findings indicating an increasing trend of expected scores based on prior performance to be more highly related to effort on later semester exams.

It may not be so much how hard a person studies (effort) but how a person studies (change in preparation) that relates to change in attributions and performance (Chandler, Spies, & Wolf, 1982). Wyatt and Medway (1984) found that study effort was an important determiner of academic success. More recently, Grabe (1985) makes his case: "An actual demonstration of effort change would seem to be a primary objective for researchers interested in the practical implications the effort-ability relationship suggests" (p. 14). The addition of measure of change in exam preparation may permit a clearer understanding of the contributions of expectancies, affects and attributions in explaining performance.

Weiner's (1979) theory depicts a general attributional model rather than individual or contextual differences in the selection of attributions. Yet Weiner (1983) warned us: "A basic error exhibited in attribution research . . . is that a priori categorization of causes is accepted without considering the situation as perceived by the

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subject" (p. 535). An implication of this is reflected in the attribution research literature. Attribution questions are typically contextually based unlike the locus of control literature that developed generic type of questionnaires. As a cognitive theory, attributional conceptions are cognitive models of action. As such, person and environmental variables must be taken into account to understand reactions. Forsterling (1986) indicated that " . . . relatively little research has been conducted concerning situational variables and how certain behaviors fit in different situational contexts" (p. 284). Therefore, it was hypothesized that undergraduate psychology students behave differently in attributional assignment and related variables associated with study strategies.

Method

Prior to each of these three exams students were asked: "How do you expect to perform on the exam you are about to take in this course? Place a checkmark in the appropriate blank."

Before each exam students were asked to "estimate the degree to which your performance on the exam you are about to take will be influenced by the following factors . . . For each factor, circle the numeral from 1 to 7 that best represents your considered judgment of how much you think that factor will influence your exam performance." The following nine attributions were randomly placed on the questionnaire: Your Knowledge of the Subject, Unusual Help from Person(s) other than Instructor, Usual Effort for Previous Exams, Task Difficulty, Mood, Ability, Effort for this Exam, Teacher Bias, and Luck. The same nine attributions but in different randomized order, were administered after each of the three exams were graded and returned.

Prior to the second and third exams the following replaced a basic demographic questionnaire: "Based upon your previous exam score, did you do anything different in preparing for this exam? If you circled 'yes,' please check below all of those things that you did differently to prepare for this exam." A list of eight of the most common preparation strategies was compiled from two previous pilot studies, in which students were asked to respond in an open-ended format. These strategies were as follows: read book more carefully, studied notes more carefully, spent more time studying; studied with others; obtained help from instructor/assistant; read other related material; studied different aspects; and obtained tutorial. An open-ended response category was also provided.

Data Source

Subjects were undergraduates (primarily sophomores and juniors) enrolled in introductory sections of sociology (N=59) and psychology (N=50) of a large midwestern university with an open admissions policy. All students who were present during test sessions elected to participate.

Results

For each of the two courses, psychology and sociology, the relationship of performance, expectancy, perceived success and nine attributions to change in examination preparation and to eight different ways in which change occurred was assessed. Change in preparation was measured before the second and third of three examinations given during the course.

Change in preparation before the second test in the psychology course was related only to perceived success (-.45) and performance (-.43), while in the sociology course, change was related to performance (-.36), expectancy (-.27) and the attributions ability (-.34) and knowledge (-.30). No variables added unique predictive variance to the best single predictor in a multiple correlation in either instance.

Before the third test in the psychology course, change was related to performance (-.50), expectancy (-.41), perceived success (-.35) and three attributions: task difficulty (-.28), luck (-.37), and effort (-.30). Only task difficulty added significantly to performance to give an R of .62. For the sociology course, change was related only to perceived success (-.29).

Of the eight specific ways in which change in preparation took place, only three Read More Carefully, Studied Notes More Carefully, and Spent More Time Studying were employed by a substantial (27%-50%) proportion of both psychology and sociology students.

In the psychology course, the attributions luck (-.29) and effort (-.28) were related to Read Book More Carefully after the second test and predicted variance in performance. In the sociology course, attributions, knowledge (-.38) and ability (-.38) were related to Read Book More Carefully before the second test and before the third test to knowledge (-.28).

Studied Notes More Carefully was related to luck (-.36, -.35) in the psychology course before the second and third tests. In neither case was this unique predictive variance. Studied Notes More Carefully was related to knowledge (-.47), ability (-.27), effort (-.35), and test effort (-.33) before the second test and effort (-.29) before the third test for the sociology course.

Spent More Time Studying was not related to any of the attributions before the second test and only to luck (-.31) before the third test for the psychology course. For the sociology course, knowledge (-.38) and ability (-.31) were related before the second test and to none of the attributions before the third test.

Importance of Study

Although there were some similarities between the responses of psychology and sociology students, there were many more differences. For example, five of the eight

changes in exam preparation strategies were different ones used by the two groups. In addition, task, luck, and effort were the preferred attributions for the psychology students in contrast to knowledge and ability for the sociology students. These important distinctions suggest that the two groups are not similar. Using only psychology students as study subjects, as may be typical, may not be justified as a representative group of all undergraduates. One's discipline may be a reflection of one's philosophy of personal causation although other variables may be implicated. Therefore, it may be wise to include a representative sample across a wider spectrum of disciplines. This study suggests that attributions may reflect a contextual bias that needs to be known.

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